

"I raised the camera, pretended to study a focus which did not include them, and waited and watched closely, sure that I would finally catch the revealing expression, one that would sum it all up, life that is rhythmized by movement but which a stiff image destroys, taking time in cross section, if we do not choose the essential imperceptible fraction of it."

Blow Up. Julio Cortázar

CINEMA AND PHOTOGRAPHY: THE POETICS OF *PUNCTUM* IN CHRIS MARKER'S *LA JETÉE* (1962)*

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Photography in cinema

Little do we need to explore our filmic memory to find numerous films in which the photographic image appears as an essential element in the narrative plot, usually as an object –a photograph– that prompts a character to recall a past moment, happy or unhappy. In filmic melodrama, for example, most flashbacks involve brief and fleeting memories of the protagonists, usually provoked by looking at a photograph or an object belonging to the missing character. D. W. Griffith knew he had taken the flashback technique from naturalist literature and was aware of its capability to create suspense by offering a momentarily suspension of the narrative flow. It can be asserted that the imagery of the flashback is part of an expressive system that seeks an emotive response from the spectator: this time alteration process is intimately linked to a close

up of the character or the photograph as object, images that serve as a starting point for numerous flashbacks (TURIM, 1989; MARZAL, 1998).

It is a photograph found in a suitcase by a militiaman's granddaughter that launches the central story of the film *Land and Freedom* (Ken Loach, 1994). In *Blow Up* (Michelangelo Antonioni, 1966), the protagonist of the film –based on Julio Cortázar's short story *The Devil's Drool*– is obsessed with a photograph taken in a public park in London, which seems to have captured a man's murder. In *Rear Window* (Alfred Hitchcock, 1954), Jeffries –immobilised because of an accident– scrutinises the world around him through his camera, until he uncovers the murder of a woman in his own backyard. In *Memento* (Christopher Nolan, 2000), Leonard Shelby, who suffers from traumatic amnesia, uses a Polaroid camera to cons-

truct his short-term memory, so that he can investigate the death of his wife, who was brutally raped and murdered. In *Amélie* (Jean-Pierre Jeunet and Marc Caro, 2001), the protagonist makes a scrapbook with discarded photographs she collects from photo booths in train stations, and uses a Kodak Instamatic camera to send her travel photographs to her parents. Thus, we find many films where the photograph appears as a fundamental element of the plot.

In the following pages, I propose to reflect on the relationship between photography and cinema, not so much on the physical presence of photographs in films (recurrent and nearly obsessive throughout the history of cinema), but on the relationship between the photographic and the cinematographic mediums, from an expressive, narrative, vital and experiential point of view. To do so, I will focus especially to the peculiar science-fiction film *La je-*

basically pointed out that “photography has freed the plastic arts from their obsession with likeness” and, unlike painting, ‘photography and the cinema on the other hand are discoveries that satisfy, once and for all and in its very essence, our obsession with realism’ (BAZIN, 1990: 26). In this way Bazin establishes some sort of homology between photography and cinema, compared with the traditional plastic arts. Indeed, photography and cinema (especially the photochemical forms) have a common base: the capacity to record the world automatically, without the (apparent) intervention of man. Photographic and cinema film mechanically records light impressions, and this recording is fixed on a stable medium. The interdependence



Shot 01. A view of the jetty (*La jetée*) at Orly

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tée (Chris Marker, 1962), without doubt one of the most fascinating directors of the twentieth century. It is a film constructed on the basis of photographs or still frames, a hypnotic and captivating story that can help us explore the complex relationship between photography and cinema.

A review of Bazin, Benjamin, Sontag and the ontology of photographic image

But first things first. In a brief but substantial text from 1945, critic, historian and cinema theorist André Bazin reflected on the nature of photography in relation to painting and cinema. He

between the two forms of expression is therefore indisputable (even today with digital images). Years earlier, in a fundamental essay, Walter Benjamin held photography responsible as the medium that had caused the loss of the *aura* of the work of art (the aim of its singular and unrepeatable nature) in the new era of technical reproducibility that began with the invention of photography back in 1839 (BENJAMIN, 1968). Thus, in mass society, technical reproducibility has produced a subversion of the very concept of art, to the extent that it is impossible to recognise the singularity of artistic artefacts, as their cult value is questioned to the de-

triment of their exhibition value. Photography thus precipitated a shift in the conception of art, now transformed into a commodity, to the point that it is extremely difficult to recognise its *strictly artistic value* (MARZAL, 2007).

Beyond constituting a historical landmark in the visual arts, photography was presented from the beginning as *index*, as *evidence of that-has-been*, i.e., photography has implanted an ingrained voyeurism that standardises the signification of all events. Thus, photographs are a pseudopresence and a sign of absence, supplying “the token presence of the dispersed relatives” (SONTAG, 1975: 6). In short, photography is a form of expression that has ended up transforming our view of the world. Thus, for Sontag, “to collect photographs is to collect the world”;¹ in other words, photography is associated with an attitude of contemporary man, who tries to shape the world according to his own design, thereby reifying it in the very act of picture taking: “To photograph people is to violate them, by seeing them as they never see themselves, by having knowledge of them that they can never have; it turns people into objects that can be symbolically possessed” (SONTAG, 1975: 10). On this point it should be added that cinema constituted a new kind of *tour de force*, culminating the bourgeois realist project that photography had started fifty-five years earlier, also restoring movement and thereby offering a more faithful reproduction of the world



Shots 02-03. On Sundays, parents bring their children to watch the planes

Shot 04. A woman's face is engraved in the child's memory

Shot 05. The woman witnesses the death of a man at Orly

(even though this restoration is absolutely *illusionistic*).

In this context, we might well wonder how such a fascinating and effective story (Chris Marker's *La jetée*) can be constructed, from the narrative point of view, (apparently) *only* with photographs that resemble still frames taken from a motion picture. This is undoubtedly a remarkable and strange film, remembered especially for having served as an inspiration for *12 Monkeys* (Terry Gilliam, 1995), which only preserves the most superficial elements of its source of inspiration. This was not the only film in which Marker used photographs to construct the sequences: other notable cases are *Si j'avais quatre dromadaires* (1966) and *Le souvenir d'un avenir* (2003).

The singular case of Chris Marker's cinema

The works of the complex and unclassifiable filmmaker Chris Marker (pseudonym for Christian François Bouche-Villeneuve) usually fall within the documentary genre. With an education in philosophy, Marker started his career as a director with *Olympia 52* (1952) and *Les statues meurent aussi* (1958) with Alain Resnais, a film that denounces Western colonialism in Africa, which was censored as were other documentaries (*¡Cuba, sí!* [1961], *Nuit et brouillard* [1955] with Resnais, etc.).

His documentary films present a very subjective and personal treatment of the topics he deals with. As a small sample, the following plots could be cited: *Le joli mai* (1962), a film close to the genre of direct cinema, set in the context of the end of the Algerian war; *Le mystère Koumiko* (1965), a documentary on the Olympic Games in Tokyo 1964, following the reflections and thoughts of Kumiko Muraoka, a friend of the film's assistant directors; *Dimanche à Pékin* (1956), a film that depicts a trip to China in which the director shows the relationship between traditional culture and the fight against capitalism; *Lettre de Sibérie* (1957), a film in which Marker offers

an epistolary illustration of a trip to past and present Siberia; *¡Cuba, sí!*, an examination of the Cuban Revolution, depicting the deep social and political changes at a time of severe harassment by the international community (this film was censored in France for two years); *Si j'avais quatre dromadaires*, a film in which a photographer and two friends use an album containing photographs taken in different corners of the world to talk about photography, human progress, cultural differences, etc.; *La sixième face du Pentagone* (1967), following the protest against US policy on the Vietnam War; *L'ambassade* (1974), a film that evokes and reflects on the then recent *coup d'état* in Chile through the discussions of a group of men and women, a political theme he returns to in *La spirale* (1975); *Le fond de l'air est rouge*, (1977), a documentary that offers a reflection on various conflicts such as Vietnam, May '68, Prague, Chile, etc., which are put in a dialectic relation; etc. It is impossible to summarise Marker's vast documentary filmography, but this short list offers a general vision of the richness and variety of his work.

From the eighties onward, Chris Marker started to use video as a medium, producing works that fall within the field of video art, video installations and CD-ROM. Notable among the main works he directed is *Sans soleil* (1982), in which a woman reads letters from her friend, a camera man who travels all over the world, comparing images of Japan and poor countries like Guinea Bissau and Cape Verde in Africa. In an audiovisual collage, the voice-over of the woman composes a narrative with her filmmaker friend's memories, thereby constructing a sort of fictitious memory. In *Level 5* (1996), Marker tells the story of Laura, a woman who wants to complete an unfinished video game begun by her deceased lover based on the Battle of Okinawa, a terrible episode of the Second World War that has been wiped from the collective memory. *Le souvenir d'un avenir* is the third film by Chris Marker made entirely with pho-

tographs by Denise Bellon, which Marker uses to track the future to come, the Second World War and the post-war colonial conflicts. On the other hand, outstanding among his multimedia productions is *Zapping Zone: Proposals for an Imaginary Television* (1990-1997), a video installation combining photographs, excerpts from his films, images from some of his works for television, computer programmes, etc., as a kind of metaphor for channel-hopping as a form of image consumption by the

deographic and hypermedia works), we can identify a desire to construct a line of thinking based on *laterality*, which continuously seeks –in the dialectic clash between word and image– to *crush* the spectators' intelligence and awaken their emotions; in short, to provoke a reflection, first and foremost, on the very nature of film writing. In this respect, I think it is worth noting the relationship Santos Zunzunegui observes between Marker's works and those of two great melancholic filmmakers, Orson Welles

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contemporary spectator. Finally, *Im-memory* (1997) presents an interactive multimedia installation, originally exhibited at the Georges Pompidou Centre in Paris, made up of photographs, sequences from his films, videos, etc., on CD-ROM, as fragments of a heterogeneous memory which each spectator has the chance to construct in his or her own way.

As Santos Zunzunegui reminds us (ORTEGA and WEINRICHTER, 2005: 165-166), André Bazin remarked in 1958 that "Chris Marker brings to his films an absolutely new notion of montage that I will call 'horizontal', as opposed to traditional montage that plays with the sense of duration through the relationship of shot to shot. Here, a given image doesn't refer to the one that preceded it or the one that will follow, but rather it refers laterally, in some way, to what is said". Thus, Marker's audiovisual writing, even in his first documentary films (which fall within the paradigm of linear discourse, as opposed to the hypertextuality of his vi-

and Jean-Luc Godard. Indeed, like Chris Marker's, Welles' filmography can be viewed as a combination and synthesis of cinema with other arts like theatre, radio or music. And like Godard, Marker does not seem to be "willing to consider the arrival of new technologies onto the cinematographic field without confronting them" (ZUNZUNEGUI: 168). As Zunzunegui suggests, while this confrontation between Godard and the new technologies involves a *tomb for the eyes* –that is, using video as a funeral instrument that allows him to construct his *Histoire(s) du cinéma* (1988-1998), Marker embraces the new technologies, without any trace of melancholy, since they allow him to work more efficiently as a *bricoleur multimedia*, a practice he pursued since he began working in the world of cinema. In a way, the poetic capacity of his writing is supported to a great extent by this sort of audiovisual *bricolage* resulting

Shots 06-10. The outbreak of World War III leads to destruction of Paris





Shots 11-13. Scientists develop a device for time travelling

Shots 14-15. Time travelling causes disappointment or madness in time travellers

from the reflective combination of the most varied cultural sources that feed his work: photography, painting, video, comics, poetry, philosophical thought, literature, music, etc. Marker's films thus transcend the traditional distinction between documentary and fiction, rhetorical effects for the creation of meaning which intermingle completely with his cinematic works.

I offer these lines to serve to introduce the reader to the complex work of the singular filmmaker Chris Marker, whose contextualisation is essential to understand the film analysed here. The reader can obtain a very general idea of Chris Marker's highly varied work from Bamchade Pourvali (1983), Margarita Ledo (2005), and especially from the complete collective study edited by Ortega and Weinrichter (2006), *Mystère Marker. Pasajes en la obra de Chris Marker*.

Borges-esque architecture in *La jetée*

La jetée is considered Marker's only purely fictional film [shot 1]. The film, which is twenty-seven minutes long, tells the story of a man marked by the childhood experience of witnessing the death of a man on the jetty at Orly Airport. A powerful and captivating voice-over tells us the terrible story of the protagonist who as an adult, after the Third World War, is chosen by scientists to travel in time and to bring back energy resources for the survival of humankind, which is now condemned to live underground because life above ground is impossible due to ra-

dioactivity. To make these journeys in time, scientists choose individuals with an ability to remember powerful images. The protagonist goes back in time, where he meets a woman with whom he falls in love, whom he remembers from his childhood experience on the jetty at Orly. On one of his journeys, he meets humans from the future, who give him an energy source that will solve the problems of humanity after the devastating war. Back in the present, scientists take him off the project. At some point, aided by the men from the future, who can also travel in time, the protagonist goes back to the past to meet his beloved again. There, on the jetty at Orly, the protagonist is shot by a man who has followed him through time, making it possible for him to witness as a child his own death as an adult.

This is a story with a clear touch of the work of Jorge Luis Borges, notable for the use of a simple and concise writing style in which the principle of economy seems to dominate. The powerful voice-over, nearly hypnotic, is utterly without embellishment or affectation. Like Borges' writing, in *La jetée* the story told by the narrator offers only essential information: it could be said that the essential is illuminated because it is not muddled with any other detail. We hear the sounds of plane engines while we see the image of the jetty at Orly, and then we hear Trevor Duncan's music, based on Russian Holy Saturday liturgical chants, solemn and mysterious. The voice-over starts the hypnotic story: "This is the



story of a man marked by an image from his childhood. The violent scene, whose meaning he would not grasp until much later, took place on the great jetty at Orly, a few years before the start of the Third World War". This is followed by the image of a bell tower and of the jetty, and the sound of the loudspeakers at Orly Airport, where his

good story by Borges, after a series of vicissitudes that articulate a winding tale [shots 11-15], the narrator leads us to the dénouement of the story, closing a circle that takes us back to the beginning of the film: "Back on the jetty at Orly, on this hot Sunday before the war, where he could now stay, he realized that the child he had once been must

in *La jetée* it is easy to hear the echoes of the hypnotic voice of the narrator in *L'année dernière à Marienbad* (Alain Resnais, 1961), or the poetic images of naked bodies showered by radioactive rain in *Hiroshima, mon amour* (Alain Resnais, 1959); but especially from *Vertigo* (Alfred Hitchcock, 1958), the references to which are clearly explicit. In

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parents have taken the protagonist as a child, as it was customary to do on Sundays in those years. Engraved in his memory is the face of a woman, disturbed by the murder of a man, whose death creates a moment of confusion in the jetty [shots 02-05]. "Moments to remember are just like other moments. They are only made memorable by the scars they leave. The face he had seen was to be the only peacetime image to survive the war. Had he really seen it? Or had he invented the tender gesture to shield him from the madness to come? The sudden noise, the woman's gesture, the crumpling body, the cries of the crowd". In only three minutes, the narrator has outlined the main plot and has incited something between curiosity and fascination for the story in the audience [Shots 06-10]. Like any

be there too, watching the planes. But first he looked for the woman's face, at the end of the jetty. He ran towards her. But when he saw the man from the underground camp he realized that one cannot escape time, and that this haunted moment, given him to see as a child, was the moment of his own death". The narrator's voice is accompanied by a series of still images that accentuate the suspense, among which the powerful image of the woman witnessing the death of the protagonist stands out [shots 36-41].

Another characteristically Borges-esque feature can be easily recognised in *La jetée*: the intertextual nature of every artistic text, how every work is always the result of a rewriting that follows a tradition from pre-existing texts with which it enters into a dialogue. Thus,

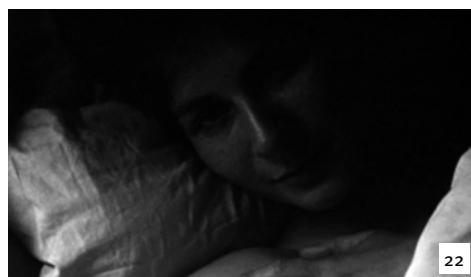
deed, Marker has always confessed his fascination for Hitchcock's films and it therefore seems inevitable to establish a relation between the protagonist's beloved/lover in *La jetée* and Madeleine, the protagonist in *Vertigo*, the object of Scottie's desire.

Photography and poeticity in Chris Marker's *La jetée*

The references to *Vertigo* are also quite evident in *La jetée* in many other respects. Both films offer a reflection on time, love and memory, essential ingredients of melancholy. From a narrative point of view, *La jetée* (the jetty, the place that marks the departure and arrival point for the protagonist's journey) follows a circular structure (even the wavy hair of the woman reminds us of Madeleine, a name with Proust

Shots 36-41. The protagonist returns to the jetty (*La jetée*) at Orly





tian reminiscences, and with a relationship could also be identified with the Möbius strip of Saul Bass' credits in Hitchcock's film), connecting past and future (which is the present for the protagonist) [shot 16]. And a reference to the sequoia forest from the famous sequence in *Vertigo* is also present in *La jetée*: on one of his first encounters while time travelling, the protagonist is walking with the woman in the park, and he uses the cross-section of a sequoia trunk to explain he comes from the future [shot 21]. Moreover, the protagonist of *La Jetée*, like Scottie, is obsessed with the image of a woman, specifically the face of a woman. This fetishistic obsession of the protagonist (like Madeleine for Scottie) is the source of the only motion shot in the film (a seven-second shot, located at minute 18:46), in which the woman is lying in bed, opens her eyes and looks straight at the protagonist (at the camera, and therefore at us) [shot 22]. It is worth remembering that in Marker's plot scientists find out that time travel only works with people who have the capability of *remembering strong images*, and thus the transcendence of memory is one of the main themes in the film.

This is precisely one of the main aspects that link *La jetée* with my reflection on photography as a form of expression. As mentioned above, the film is also –or above all– a reflection on the nature of the photographic image. Regarding photography, Barthes pointed out that “the Photograph always leads the corpus I need back to the body I see; it is the absolute Particular, the sovereign Contingency, matte and somehow stupid, the *This* (this photograph, and not Photography), in short, what

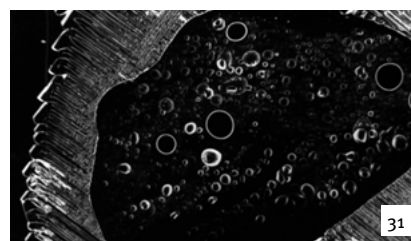
Lacan calls the *Tuche*, the Occasion, the Encounter, the Real, in its indefatigable expression” (BARTHES, 1980: 15). Thus, for Barthes the photograph produces an experience of disorder and discomfort, provoking a strong contradiction between our own subjectivity and what it seems to refer to mechanically (the real referent). In the story in *La jetée*, we find a continuity of still images, bound together by the seductive voice of the narrator; photographs that are utterly disturbing, sharp and captivating. It is a collection of images that could fall within the territory of the Barthesian concept of *punctum*. Unlike *studium*, *punctum* is associated with the experience of observing intimate photographs, a fascination that cannot usually be explained with words: it is a sort of *rapture* (like the one suffered by the protagonist of Iván Zulueta's *Arrebato*, 1980) which can only be experienced. It is not for nothing that *La jetée*, as an album of photographs of a fascinating story, could be said to allow us to understand the act of *looking at photographs* as an experience that is very close to death: “In Photography, the presence of the thing (at a certain past moment) is never metaphoric; and in the case of animated being, their life as well, except in the case of photographing corpses; and even so: if the photograph then becomes horrible, it is because it certifies, so to speak, that the corpse is alive, as *corpse*: it is the living image of a dead thing. For the photograph's immobility is somehow the result of a perverse confusion between two concepts: the Real and the Live: by attesting that the object has been real, the photograph surreptitiously induces belief that it is

Shot 16. A woman's hairdo recalls Madeleine's in *Vertigo*

Shot 21. They stop in front of a sequoia trunk, where he says he comes from the future

Shot 22. The only shot with movement; the woman looking straight at the camera

Shots 31-35. The protagonist manages to travel to the future



alive" (BARTHES, 1980: 123). In this way, the photograph confirms the end of a time that has passed, the impossibility of going back or recovering the lost referent. These are the parameters of the Barthesian *punctum*, but also of the aesthetic proposal of Chris Marker's *La jetée*.

We can thus see that the ontological ambiguity of the photographic image is a fundamental key to understanding the extraordinary metaphorical and poetic power of *La jetée*. Indeed, the indeterminacy or entropy of meanings is shown in multiple ways in the film: the names of the main characters are omitted (the absence of names facilitates even further the projection of the spectator into the story), there is absolutely no reasoned explanation offered as to how time travelling is possible or any information on the technology that

makes it possible [shots 31-35], and the protagonist's journeys back in time and his appearances do not seem to arouse of the slightest surprise, fear or shock in the woman.

But what is also particularly remarkable is the fact that numerous images –shots or photographs– are close-ups of people (the legs of the child on the railing of the jetty at Orly [shot 3], and close-ups, medium shots and American shots of the woman; the girl in the foreground when the protagonist returns to the jetty at Orly as an adult [shot 36]; etc.), close-ups of objects (lifeless statues, the boat on the lake, the cat looking at the camera –Marker has a weakness for cats–, stuffed ('eternal') animals in the natural history museum visited by the couple, a metaphor for death) [shots 23-30] or long shots of spaces and places (the views

of Paris in ruins after the devastating war, the cemetery, a room where the lovers meet, the images of the network of passages where the survivors of the war live), which are simply intriguing. Several shots are linked through cross-dissolves [shots 17-20], through a *lateral montage*, as Bazin would define it, which allows the construction of images with a high density of meaning (BENSMAÏA, 1988), weaving a denser, more opaque and complex sequence of images than what we are used to.

Ellipsis, spaces between shots (still images) and silences –in short, the narrative indeterminacy of *La jetée* (ODIN, 1981: 147-171)– allow the composition of a story with clear dreamlike qualities, pure entropy that imprints mystery on the film and prompts us to consider the possibility that everything has been dreamed or imagined by the protagonist (or by us, the spectators). This indeterminacy alluded to above is the manifestation of *poeticity* in its most clear and explicit expression: in cinema, what is not shown or narrated (ellipsis, off-camera space [GÓMEZ TARÍN, 2006]), is as important as what is explicit. *La jetée* is undoubtedly a film that penetrates deep beneath our skin and invites us to absorb the images and words that evoke all its sounds and photographs and make them our own. In this way, *La jetée* constitutes a lucid reflection on time, space, representation and the human psyche (CHAMARRETTE, 2008), but is above all a masterly reflection on the very nature of cinema. In this sense, Marker's work, and especially *La jetée*, can today be considered an effective antidote against the trivialisation of images that surrounds us.

Shots 23-30. The couple visits a museum of *eternal* animals





Shots 17-20. The continuous fade contributes to making the story more dense and poetic

Notes

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¹ Sontag would seem to coincide with the lucid analysis by Italo Calvino in his short story "The Adventure of a Photographer" in *Difficult Loves* (Orlando, Florida: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1984), which tells of an amateur photographer who ends up being swallowed by his obsession with photography. The protagonist loses his sense of reality and at the end of his life is completely isolated from the world because of his search for photographic plenitude, which for him consists of photographing photographs.

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